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The Globalisation of Political Science: An African Perspective*

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L. Adele Jinadu**

Abstract

Globalised political science, including its professionalisation, is part of the cultural superstructure facilitating Western hegemony. It functions under the guise of universal science, with serious implications for knowledge production in and about Africa, especially African politics. During this period of liberal triumphalism, it has undergone a paradigmatic shift in its application to African politics, emphasising institutional reform as a pre-requisite for democratic transition, thereby exposing its limitations. It conflates the problem of democracy with institutional reform; it is unable to account for the role of various social forces in securing the current transition to democracy; and it is unable to relate the problem of democracy to the problem of underdevelopment in Africa.

I

The end of the cold war, as well as profound changes in the world economy and in inter-state relations brought about by the technological and informatics revolution of the post World War II period, have given rise to a new interest in globalisation as a process which, by definition, creates relationships and networks that necessarily cut across national boundaries. Globalisation as a contemporary process that has created, or is creating, the so-called new world order might be regarded in positive or negative terms. It can be viewed positively from a neo-classical or neo-liberal perspective as the triumph of political liberalism and the unfettered play of market forces. Further it may be regarded as likely to strengthen the economic and socio-cultural basis for the unity of mankind by offering fresh possibilities for

“new partnerships” in the new world order. But it can also be viewed negatively from a Marxist perspective. On such a view, it is a new form of imperialism, heralding a New Age of Imperialism in which national, regional and global asymmetries, characterised by social injustice and unequal exchange are much more pronounced and pernicious than was the case before.

Whichever way one views it, the character of previous as well as contemporary processes of globalisation, almost by definition, involves the diffusion or “transnationalisation” of capital and of the dominant ideas of social and cultural organisation that undergird and propel it to other societies from the “most advancing society” (Lewis Feuer, 1986: 3).

II

I am interested in this chapter to explore one contemporary aspect of this diffusionist theory of globalisation in its neo-classical or neo-liberal formulation. I focus on the globalisation of political science, including its professionalisation, as a knowledge-based activity since the end of the second world war. More specifically, I want to speculate about the consequences or implications of the application or diffusion or export of this globalised political science to Africa.

My concern includes the following. How, given the economic and social or cultural context of contemporary globalisation and the neo-liberal claims about emerging “new partnerships” in the world order, can globalised political science advance our knowledge and understanding of African politics? How well has it done this, or how better can it or should it do this?

III

But first, there is need to develop the notion of a globalised political science and the concept of “new partnerships”. I begin from the assumption that concretely the reference to globalised political science, including the primary source of its specific diffusion to Africa and indeed, to other parts of the world, including Canada and Europe, is mainstream political science as it has evolved and developed in the United States of America. On this point, Erkki Berndtson [1991: 40] has argued that,

partly due to the early institutionalisation, and partly because of the global hegemony of the United States after World War II, American political science has influenced the institutionalisation of political science around the world.

Confirming this, Dag Anckar [1991: 189] has observed of the development of

political science in Western Europe and particularly in the Nordic countries that, although

[the] scientific climate has become more pluralistic in terms of influences and dependencies ... the reliance on American traditions and conceptions still dominates the picture.

To elaborate the notion of “mainstream political science,” including the various trajectories of its evolution and development in the US, and of its export abroad, is beyond the scope of my concern here. Suffice it to say that the term “mainstream political science”, as used here, refers to the dominant paradigms and trends in the study of the discipline in the United States. Globalised mainstream political science refers to the export or diffusion of this mainstream US political science to other parts of the world. The character of this globalised mainstream US political science has been well described, analysed and discussed by others, and need not be detailed here [see Crick, 1959; Easton, 1985; Finifter, 1983; Lepawsky, 1964; Ricci, 1984]. For my purpose here, however one feature of this globalised mainstream political science is the link as well as the antinomies between its scientific pretensions and its ideologised preference for and attachment to American liberal democracy [Gunnell, 1991: 24]. This globalised mainstream political science is a critical dimension of the cultural superstructure utilised as part of the wider strategic extension of the power of the US in the world. As Ake [1979: 100] has argued, with respect to the theory of political development, typically,

Western scholarship on Third World countries ... is an important tool for controlling Third World perceptions of their world and eventually Third World behaviour.

Globalised mainstream political science necessarily serves this function under the guise of developing a universal, cross-cultural, cross-national, value-free “positivistic” political science. As Hyden [1989: 14] has pointed out,

following the natural-science model, the principal preoccupation of social science research became the testing of rigorously formulated hypotheses as instrument of confirming lawlike generalizations about social behaviour and social processes ... The globalization of American political science was the outcome of this process within the social sciences. The belief at the time was that with growing precision of language, cross-cultural explanatory generalizations were possible.

However, it is in the sense of its structurally determined role in the consolidation

and extension of the extension of US power in the world that the post Second World War II interest of mainstream US political science with development theory, (variously subsumed under such subdisciplinary fields as political change, comparative public administration, political development or political modernisation) assumes significance as a form of cultural imperialism.

IV

The agencies and sources of this diffusion or intellectual dominance have included US-based or US-trained political scientists and other academics, US universities and research institutions, exchange programmes, professional networks of political scientists and other social scientists, and the philanthropic foundations like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation.[see Stifel *et al.*, 1982: 57-82]. What Dag Anckar [1991: 189] has observed of Western Europe is even much more true of Africa:

The emergence of various exchange programmes, offering study scholarships in the US, was an important mechanism for conveying American influences to Europe and served to impress major theoretical and methodological innovations on a rising generation of European political scientists.

Before I explore the implications of contemporary globalisation and the “new partnerships” expected to emerge from it for the study of African politics, let me set out two assumptions that have informed my approach to the problem.

V

First, as it has generally been pointed out [Ake: 1979; Leys, 1997], development theory, with its focus on world capitalist-industrial development and its replication in “follower societies”, provided the dominant paradigm used by mainstream US political science to study African politics in the immediate post-independence years in the 1960s. The assumptions about African politics which underlay development theory in the 1960’s are still reflected in mainstream US political science in its current application to Africa. My second assumption is that globalised mainstream political science, based on a reconfigured concept of “new partnerships” in the context of contemporary globalisation, now needs to begin to look at African politics from theoretical perspectives other than those that have provided it with its paradigmatic liberal or neo-liberal theoretical or ideological foundations.

“New partnerships” refers in a generalised sense to the opportunities for realignments in the nascent character or in the reconfiguration of global power relations and in the world system itself as a result of the end of the cold war and

structural changes in the world economy brought about by globalisation. These structural changes include the emergence of transnational corporations as major catalytic actors in the emergent world order, protected by and acting in most cases as surrogates for their home governments, and the extensive, virtually unhindered movement of monopoly capital across national boundaries.

The ideological foundations for this contemporary phase of globalisation is neo-liberalism in its emphasis on economic and political liberalisation and in its consequential rejection of social democracy and Keynesian state interventionism. This regnant neo-liberalism is at bottom a theory of world capitalist development. On the basis of this it has sought to define the parameters under which and within whose frameworks the new partnerships in the world are to be pursued. In this sense, therefore, the new globalisation, emerging out of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, both of which events or developments it presaged or facilitated, is a metaphor or euphemism for the triumphalist dominance of finance capital, under the leadership of the United States.

It needs to be added here, parenthetically, that in spite of all the talk about the "end of history" [Fukuyama, 1992], the realignments arising from the new globalisation, for example, the hegemonic emergence of the United States, the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the new European Union, the unification of Germany, projected reforms of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, the break up of the Soviet Union and the command economies of Eastern Europe, have all highlighted and made problematic the contradictions thrown up by this new process of globalisation. The undercurrents of these contradictions are much more structurally fundamental, reflecting the basic contradiction between capital and labour, than the effort to characterise them according to [Huntington, 1996] as arising out of the clash of civilisations and cultures, would suggest.

VI

How has globalised mainstream political science approached African politics in the wake of this triumphant neo-liberalism? To answer this question, it is necessary to return to the origins of development theory and of development or area studies in what has been described as Keynesian economics (Leys, 1996) and the post world war II "butskellist" consensus on the managed economy in Europe. Globalised mainstream political science drew substantially on and reflected the ideological concerns of the statist developmentalist model implicit in Keynesianism and the managed economy when it turned its searchlight to Africa in the period immediately before and after African independence in the 1960s. In doing this, globalised mainstream political science was understandably eclectic. As is shown in its application of development or modernisation theory to Africa, globalised political

science, during the high tide of the behavioural revolution in political science, “borrowed” concepts and insights from social and political anthropology, sociology, psychology and history and, much later from economics. [Leys, 1969; Ake, 1979]

VII

In spite of its pretensions to develop a universal theory of political science, for which Africa and the “new nations” were to provide data, globalised mainstream political science was constrained by its liberal ideological foundations. It defined the African development agenda as an imitative or replicating one, characterised by the transfer and institutionalisation of the salient substructural and superstructural features of the developmental trajectories already charted by the west to Africa. These features were enlightened state capitalism, of a basically state-welfarist or pseudo social democratic or Keynesian nature, liberal constitutionalism, competitive party politics and parliamentarianism. Two aspects of this ideologised application of globalised mainstream political science to Africa must be noted. First, there was a “missionary” dimension to it. This was what unwittingly provided a symbiotic link between mainstream political scientists and policy makers in the west. As Ake [1979: 103] so well puts it,

“the works of these writers invariably reflects their role within the cultural apparatus of capitalist/imperialist states.”

It was in this objective sense that this political science became an important cultural aspect, and indeed a strategic agent of the hegemonic thrust of finance capital under the incipient globalisation processes of the post-1945 period. Second, the focus of mainstream political science on nation building as a developmental project in Africa, in so far as it was instrumentalist and problem-solving, highlighted the political and sociocultural requisites for development. These were non-economic factors that development economists had tended to ignore. Invariably, however, such non-economic factors were in the final analysis abstractions from the development experience of the west.

VIII

The basic epistemic and theoretical assumptions and the various methodological approaches that informed globalised mainstream political science in its application to the study of African politics have been highlighted and critiqued by others (e.g. Ake, 1979, Leys, 1969; Leys, 1996), and need not be repeated here. The response of globalised mainstream political science to such critique has been a paradigmatic

shift taking the form of neo-liberalism as the regnant global ideological movement. Applied to Africa, regnant neo-liberalism subsumes a theory of the African state as weak, over-extended and ill-equipped in its present form to undertake the task of economic and political development. In place of the state, the market is advocated as the most rational and efficient allocators of economic resources. There should be political reforms leading to competitive electoral party politics. The ultimate goal of the reforms is the the minimalist state.

This paradigmatic shift is also reflected in the World Bank's advocacy of "good governance" as the panacea for Africa's problems of economic and political development. Jettisoning its earlier support of state capitalism as the engine for sustainable economic growth and political development, the World Bank now requires African countries to implement a package of policy reforms as a condition for loans. The reform package mainly includes structural adjustment, economic liberalisation, democratisation and civil service reform. In short, neo-liberalism now defines the parameters of the "new partnerships" under contemporary globalisation. African countries, as "follower-societies" are now expected to subscribe to the institutional imperatives of neo-liberalism.

IX

What has been the impact of neo-liberalism on the study of African politics by globalised mainstream political science? The impact is to be seen partly in a change in neo-liberalism as a global ideology has led to a paradigmatic shift in the approach to African politics and partly in its critique of modernisation theory as applied to Africa. In the latter case, much like the dependency and neo-marxist critiques of development theory, neo-liberalism's theoretical baggage has enabled globalised western political science to refocus on the causes of institutional failures and therefore on contradictions and conditions which it had earlier ignored or which the then regnant theoretical-analytical tools were ill-equipped to discern. [Leys, 1996 ch. 4]

The emphasis on institutional reforms in the political marketplace and good governance, specifically its concern with competitive (electoral) party politics, has also spawned, within globalised mainstream political science, a new interest in the liberal democratisation project, including democratic elections. This is consistent with the need to make the market (economic and political) work better - in other words, give so-called market forces unfettered freedom. Underlying this concern is a set of assumptions. These are the teleological assumption that the design or restructuring of economic and political institutions, and constitutional engineering to enable citizens maximise their utilities, will in the long run advance the public good and thereby enhance the prospects for liberal democracy.

X

Let me now return to the questions I posed in Section II above. How, in the context of the emerging “new partnerships” made possible by the new world order, can globalised mainstream political science advance our understanding of African politics?

I have indicated in Section V that the structural dynamics of contemporary globalisation have created new asymmetries between the western world and Africa which may be described as a new form of imperialism. Neo-liberalism’s emphasis on the minimalist state and on economic liberalisation, which in effect means that the market and not the state should be “the allocator of social surplus” [Leys, 1996:89], has aided the “transnationalisation” or dominance of finance capital. This has placed African and other developing countries in a weak position to protect themselves against unfair competition.

Globalised mainstream political science has now, as before, taken the nature of the world order and the asymmetrical partnerships deriving from it as given. It continues to take what can be described as a “conformist” view of Africa as a “follower-society,” with no choice but to continue to imitate the west, to import its economic and political institutions and to adapt itself to contemporary globalisation. The study of African politics should therefore be carried out from the perspective of the dominant actors in the contemporary world system. In both theoretical and practical terms, this has generally meant the economic and political foundations of western industrial societies.

XII

An important theoretical and indeed policy-oriented dimension of globalised mainstream political science in its application to African politics is to be found in what has been described as the “new political economy,” or “new institutionalism.” This is because

... a kind of partial hegemony of rational choice idea has undoubtedly been occurring in U.S political science, and not least in the field of development. [Leys, 1996:81]

As I have already argued in Section IX above, one important advantage which neo-liberalism has over modernisation theory is in highlighting institutional failures and weaknesses as the cause of the poor performance of the African state. Situating the reasons for these institutional failures or weaknesses of the African state in the pre-eminence accorded social needs [politics] over citizens’ economic interests, rational choice theory tries to provide a basis for overcoming such

failures and weaknesses. It hypothesizes that the policy processes must accord primacy to the autonomy of market relations as the engine and guarantor of development.

How does this advance our knowledge of African politics? Leys [1996: 80-103] has offered an analysis of the strengths and limitations of rational choice theory as applied to Africa. He argues [Leys, 1996: 82] that,

its [i.e. rational choice theory's] main achievements have been in throwing light on relatively micro-level institutional problems; attempts to present it as a new general theory of politics have been singularly unsuccessful, (Leys 1996: 82).

He goes on to conclude, with respect to Bates' application of rational choice to African politics, that,

... it is not politics that "impair" market efficiency, but market forces that conflict with social goals; and in reality what is at stake in Africa is precisely a conflict between the principles of "market society" and alternative conceptions-some traditional, some modern-of collective welfare. The assumption, then, that in dealing with "economic matters" rational people act primarily for material advantage is by no means a "natural" starting point ...; it is a highly political one, which takes as "natural" what is in fact at stake in the struggle for Africa's future [Leys, 1996: 95].

XIII

Another important theoretical and policy-oriented dimension of the application of globalised mainstream political science to African politics is liberal democratic theory. The focus on democratisation has emerged in the wake of what has been characterised as "global democratic transitions," beginning with the transitions in Southern Europe (Spain and Portugal) and Latin America.

Its paternity in neo-liberalism and, therefore, its theoretical affinity with rational choice theory or the new political economy arises from the thesis that one-party rule and other forms of authoritarian rule, like military rule, create market distortions and imperfections by denying and stifling individual choices and options in the political marketplace. It is this institutional failure or weakness, which results in the vicious cycle of political instability and lack of accountability in postcolonial Africa. The solution is to base politics on individualism and self interest; in other words, on "exchanges among rational self-interested citizens" [March and Olson, 1995: 6].

By far the greater part of globalised mainstream political science literature on

African transitions [see Luckham and White, 1996; March and Olsen, 1995; Buijtenhuijs and Thiriot, 1995, among others] is preoccupied with these as a transition to liberal democracy. This is defined as limited or constitutional government, based on the Schumpeterian competitive multiparty electoral model, on the condition that the results of such competition, i.e. of elections, are “uncertain [and] indeterminate ex ante.” [Przeworski, 1991: 10; see also Luckham and White, 1996: 2-3]

The wide acceptance of this dominant view of democratic transitions as transitions to liberal democracy across ideological lines has been expressed by Luckham and White [1996: 283-4] in the following words:

The acceptance of liberal democracy has extended to include the radical Left, partly because the Leninist alternative has collapsed and never delivered much in the way of democracy in any case. Socialists of course seek to extend the notion of democracy beyond the political into the social and economic system, but now more than previously they are willing to recognise the inherent virtues of the standard model of liberal democracy.

But in its application to Africa, the focus of globalised mainstream political science on democratic transition as transition to liberal democracy has been, among other preoccupations, on the relationship between democracy and development, between democracy and demilitarisation, between democratic consolidation and the roles of non political elites, like businessmen and soldiers on the role of donor communities in the democratisation process, and on democracy as a procedure.[Luckham and White, 1996: 4-10, 274-289]

How much has this approach contributed to our understanding of African politics? At least, it has been useful in improving our understanding of the processes and limitations of democratic transitions in Africa. In this respect, the notion of transitions as a design problem, over which various (endogenous and exogenous) conjunctural social forces are in contention, requiring special political “invention” to solve, is useful. This is more so with the location of the problem and processes of democratic transitions in structural rather than in psycho-cultural and institutional causes. Also useful is the typologisation of transitions for purposes of comparative analysis.

These notwithstanding, some shortcomings of the focus of globalised mainstream social science on liberal democracy still remain. First, it tends to conflate the problem of democracy in Africa with the adoption of liberal democracy and its institutional artifacts. This is problematic in that it fails to address the problem of ethnic pluralism in Africa where, to use Georges Balandier’s apt phrase, “the societies are ethnically split,” and where, as a result, the simple majoritarian principle of liberal democracy may have to be tempered with consociational

principles. [*cf.* Ake, 1996] In short, the problem of whether and how group rights can be accommodated with individual rights in liberal democratic theory is hardly addressed. The question, from this perspective, turns on whether some other democratic theory is better suited to Africa than liberal democratic theory. Related to this is the little attention given to the relationship between culture and democracy, a lacuna arising out of the tendency to assume that (liberal) democracy is an objective, culture-neutral phenomenon.

Second, it has shown little interest in studying grassroots-based social movements and their impact in initiating and sustaining democratic transitions in Africa. This itself may reflect a carry over from earlier studies on African nationalism which were informed by what Thomas Hodgkin once called “the clever elite-dumb masses” thesis. By this, the contribution of western educated elites to African nationalism was exaggerated over the contribution of the African peasantry and other declassé groups.

Third, it does not adequately relate the problem of democratic transitions to the structural problem of underdevelopment as arising from the structural inequalities and unequal exchanges created by the imperialist logic of contemporary globalisation. Put differently, the literature on democratic transitions in Africa has not really addressed the implications of the African economic crisis and underdevelopment for democratic consolidation in Africa [Robinson, 1996; and Hansen, 1987]. The sum total of all these shortcomings is to raise serious questions about the usefulness of neo-liberalism as a conceptual tool for explaining the problems of democracy and development in Africa.

XIV

What is the way forward, if the globalisation of mainstream western political science is to be built on the basis of promoting and forging “new partnerships”? The answer is that the “new partnership” must be based on reciprocity. This means that Africa must be viewed less as a “laboratory” for testing western-derived concepts. Nor must its development problems be defined and analysed in the context of western political institutions and processes. Two implications of this for the application of globalised mainstream political science to Africa should be pointed out. First, Africa must be studied in terms of the conditions and possibilities for its own self-centered development, and the adaptation of its own indigenous institutions to the problems of governance. Globalised mainstream political science must readjust its intellectual lenses in looking at Africa. To do this requires going back to historical and micropolitical studies, in the tradition of political and social anthropologists, like Evans Pritchard, Peter Llyod and Georges Balandier.

Second, globalised mainstream political science should begin to explore how data collected in and about Africa can illuminate aspects of politics in the west. In

other words, the west should itself become a “laboratory” for testing data and hypotheses derived from Africa. Here again, much can be learnt about the dialectics of race and ethnic relations in the west from the work of those political and social anthropologists who studied ethnic and race relations in Africa. In the same vein, data gathered from work on patronalism, prebendalism and “belly-politics” in Africa might provide interesting insights into the nature of similar problems in the west. This is what reciprocity demands; and this is what globalised mainstream political science should begin to address. It needs to begin to pursue the question, “what can we learn from and about African politics to help our understanding of our own politics and in developing a general theory of politics?” This is what the idea of “new partnerships,” applied to the globalisation of political science, should be about.

Notes

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- ** Professor of Political Science and Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Political Science, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria and President, African Association of Political Science (AAPS), 1997-1999.

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